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ABSTRACT

Linguists and psychologists have disagreed concerning the development and nature of children's social perceptions of others on the basis of speech differences. The present study sought to determine in what ways 8- and 9-year olds from different socioeconomic backgrounds might react to dialect differences. Ninety-two randomly selected 8- and 9-year-old children of both sexes from three schools listened to two recorded speech samples, one from a well-educated black woman who spoke standard English and the other from a black woman who was less educated and who spoke nonstandard Black English. The children were asked to complete a semantic differential scale for each voice. A free discussion then elicited additional information from the children concerning their attitudes toward the speakers. In general, positive qualities, such as "smart," "pretty," "rich," and "nice," were attributed more often to the standard-english speaker, with qualities such as "dumb," "ugly," "poor," and "mean," attributed more often to the non-standard speaker. Results show that the subjects are sensitive to speech differences and have absorbed many of the attitudes of society toward standard and nonstandard speech. The discussion period indicated that they are also able to conceptualize verbally their attitudes toward speech differences. However, they have not yet formed a racial stereotype matching the adult model, since responses functioned independently of perceived race to a degree not previously suspected. It is suggested that factors in addition to speech characteristics must be considered in planning intervention techniques relating to children's cross-cultural attitudes. (Author/AM)

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Children's Linguistic Attitudes: A Study and Some Implications

Richard L. Light

Background

Much of the impetus for this study came from a paper by James Fleming (1971) in which he observed that two prominent names in linguistics, William Labov and Martin Joos, seemed to be at odds regarding a phenomenon of increasing interest to both linguistics and psychologists: they appeared to disagree regarding the age at which childrens' perceptions of socially significant speech variables first appear. About a decade ago Labov suggested that children do not attach social significance to dialect differences until about the age of puberty (1965:91). Joos on the other hand, at about the same time, suggested that "very young children have considerable skill in judging adults by their speech." (1966:103) These contrasting views of Joos and Labov were perhaps not surprising since most of the research which was being undertaken on childrens' language at the time related to such areas as speech comprehension and production, and to the nature of nonstandard English. There was little direct reference to childrens' attitudes toward speech differences in these studies. (E.g., Eisenberg, Berlin, Dill, and Frank 1968; Osser, Wang, and Zaid, 1969; Fasold and Wolfram, 1970).

Some researchers have now begun to focus more directly upon the attitudes of children that may be triggered by dialect differences. Baratz (1969) demonstrated that a majority of the 30 third graders (both black and white) who participated in her study identified racial

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differences on the basis of speech differences. More recently, other researchers have designed studies to explore even younger childrens' attitudes toward dialect differences. Rosenthal (1977), for example, demonstrated that the preschool children in her study reacted in different ways to different speech characteristics. Fleming's own study (1971) attempted to find significantly different attitudes in 9 year-olds toward various tape-recorded dialects. Fleming summarized his findings as follows: "In spite of the absence of statistically significant effects, there seems to be enough justification to continue to pursue the possibility that at least for some children, listening to certain others, what they hear is simply not 'just talk'" (Fleming, 1971:330).

The present study was an attempt to determine in what ways 8 and 9 year-old children from different socioeconomic backgrounds might react to dialect differences. Further, we were interested in determining the extent to which such children could verbally conceptualize their attitudes using a simplified version of the Osgood semantic differential scale. (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, 1957). More specifically, the study was designed to explore the reactions of these 8 and 9 year-old children to "standard" and "nonstandard" Black English.[1] Since nonstandard Black English utilizes a number of

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[1] Nonstandard Black English is defined here as that variety of English which utilizes the phonological and grammatical features noted for Black English by Fasold and Wolfram (1970).

---

features that are highly stigmatized in our society (Shuy, 1972), our assumption was that if children were going to react to speech patterns at all, they would react to these most socially significant ones.

Procedures

The ninety-two subject children listened to two recorded speech samples: a well-educated black woman who spoke standard English (Voice I) and another black woman who was less educated and who spoke nonstandard Black English (Voice II).[1] The speech samples were each one and a half minutes long and consisted of extemporaneous unemotional descriptions of the womens' daily school-related routines. The children were asked to respond to the two speech samples by completing a semantic differential scale for each of the two speakers. The scale included the categories of intelligence, labeled smart-dumb on the scale, appearance (pretty-ugly), personality (nice-mean), economic background (rich-poor), and race (black-white).

[1] Although the usefulness of the matched-guise technique of eliciting attitudes toward different languages is well-known (e.g., Gardner and Lambert, 1972) it has been suggested (Roger Shuy, personal communication) that such a technique is less likely to be practicable in working with dialect differences. We thus felt the use of two speakers of different dialects, with control for topic, sex and setting, was appropriate for our study.

The subjects listened to Voice I with their papers face down, then turned their sheets over and recorded their judgments of the speaker in terms of the five categories above. The same procedure was followed for Voice II. The sheets were collected and a free discussion followed, designed to elicit additional information from the children concerning their attitudes toward the two speakers.

Results

In general, the children's responses, summarized in Figure 1, followed a clear pattern: the positive qualities (smart, pretty, rich, nice) were attributed more often to the standard English-speaking Voice I and the negative qualities (dumb, ugly, poor, mean) were attributed more often to non-standard Voice II.[1] For the three categories of intelligence, appearance, and economic background, the assignment of positive traits (smart, pretty, rich) to standard speech and negative traits (dumb, ugly, poor) to non-standard speech was demonstrated by Chi-square analyses to be significant at the $p < .001$ level. The category of personality (nice-mean) shows this same pattern of responses, but the differences are much smaller and are more meaningful when viewed as following the general pattern.

[1] Results of the study have reported in more detail in Light, Richard; Richard, Deborah, and Bell, Paul (forthcoming).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1

CHILDRENS' JUDGEMENTS ABOUT CHARACTERISTICS OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NON-STANDARD (VOICE II) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

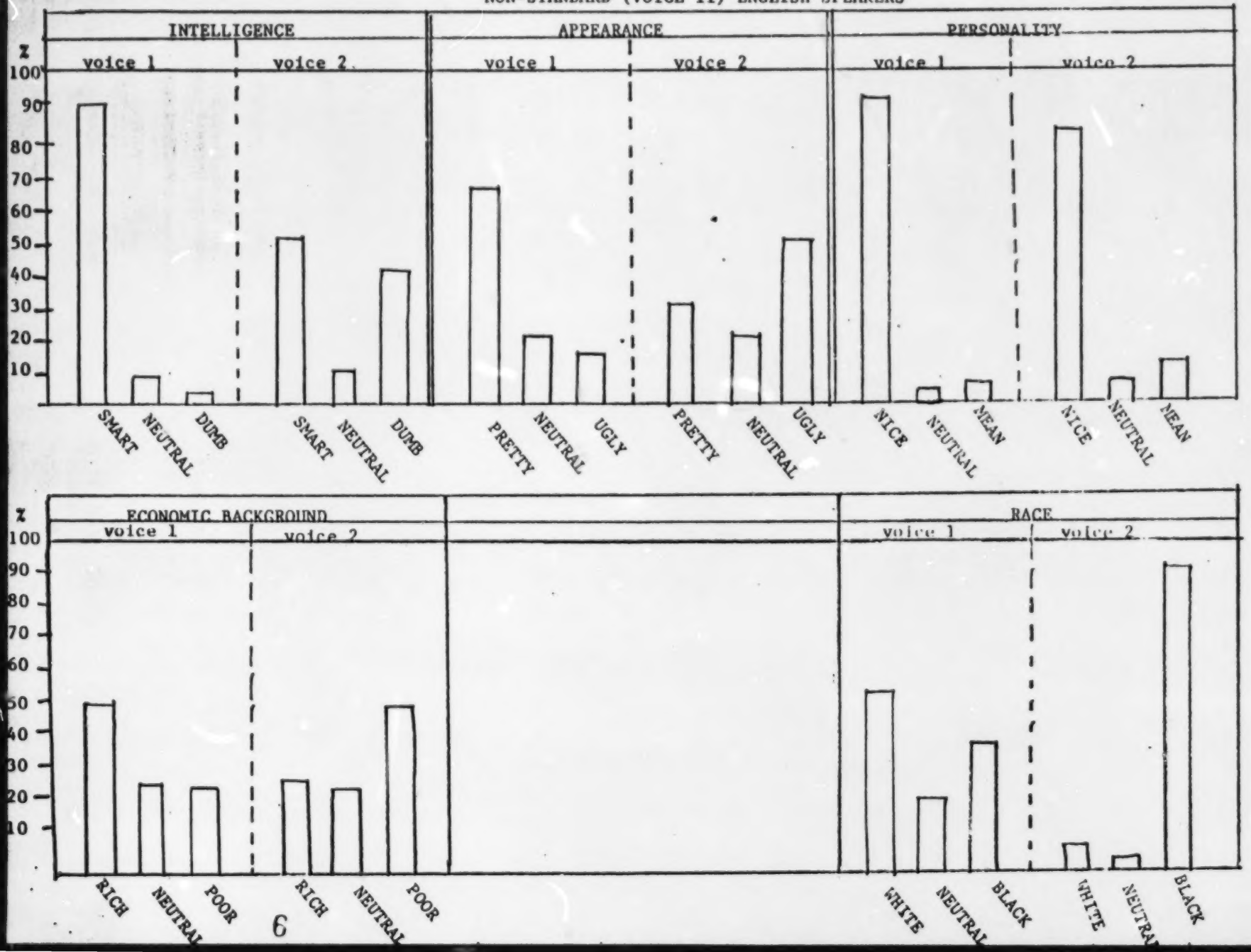


Figure 1 illustrates that even though both speakers were black, the predominently standard English of Voice 1 was judged by 53% of the children to be spoken by a white person, whereas only 6% believed the user of the nonstandard English of Voice II to be white This pattern of response was significant at the $p<.001$ level. This is consistent with prior research which has suggested that standard dialects are most often identified as being used by white speakers, and nonstandard dialects as being used by black speakers (Labov, 1969).

Although results of this study seem to indicate the children have fully-developed stereotypes about others on the basis of speech (Figure 2), they did in fact react differently from adults in at least one respect. Adults, according to recent studies, attribute both race and a range of other traits to others whom they hear, on the basis of what they hear (Abrahams, 1972). These clusters of traits are assigned as units, i.e., once a racial stereotype is elicited in adults, the person is tagged with the whole cluster of attributes associated with the stereotype. As DeCamp and Baird, (1973) noted:

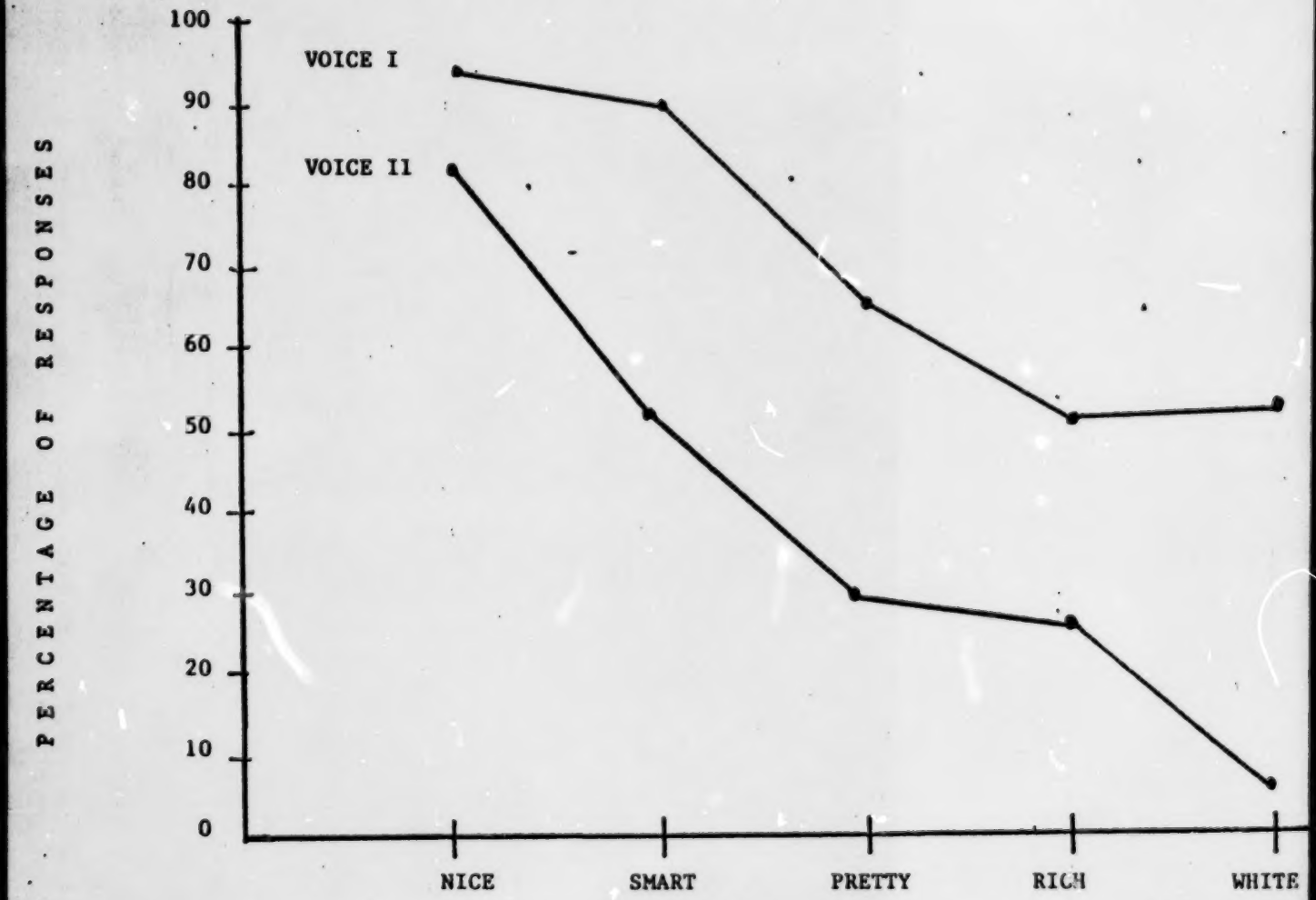
> Although nonstandard features include in... speech samples were gradually increased, a minimum amount of nonstandardness was sufficient to elicit a complete stereotype of a Black person. It appears that language merely served to identify the speaker's group membership. (p. 68)

Insert Figure 2 about here

Figure 2

CHILDRENS' JUDGEMENTS ABOUT STANDARD (VOICE I)
AND NON-STANDARD (VOICE II) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

N = 92



These observations did not hold true for the children in our study. They seemed more open-minded than the adults DeCamp and Baird studied. When choice of race was correlated with other variables (Table 1) it was found that subjects' perceptions of Voice I as Black did not significantly correlate with choice of the negative traits in society's stereotype. Chi-square values for choice of race correlated with choices in the other categories of appearance, personality, economic background, and intelligence were not significant. Thus for the children in this study, the speech samples elicited judgments in four social categories which did not correlate significantly with choice of race. In other words, the speech itself, and not the perceived race of the speaker, was the basis of the children's positive and negative judgments in terms of the four categories on the semantic differential scale.

Insert Table 1 about here

For example, of 34 children who identified Voice I (standard) as Black, 31 judged the speaker to be "smart". (See Table 1, columns 3 and 4). Further, of the 10 Black lower working class children sampled, 4 said Voice II (nonstandard) was White and dumb, and 4 said she was Black and smart. (One said Black and dumb and one said Black and "don't know"). This is consistent with the findings of Shuy and Williams, who noted such a trend for Black adults: "Blacks generally evaluate Negro speech in a more positive manner than do white respondents." (1973:90). This inclination for the Black

Table 1

CHOICE OF RACE FOR VOICE 1
CORRELATED WITH JUDGEMENTS IN FOUR CATEGORIES*

CATEGORY / JUDGEMENT		INTELLIGENCE				ECONOMIC BACKGROUND				PERSONALITY				APPEARANCE			
		SMART		DUMB		RICH		POOR		NICE		MEAN		PRETTY		UGLY	
CHILDREN'S BACKGROUND	PERCEIVED RACE N**	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B
UPPER MIDDLE CLASS	28	16	9	0	0	11	4	4	3	18	8	0	1	10	5	4	2
MIDDLE CLASS	27	13	13	0	1	7	8	1	4	13	12	0	2	8	6	3	5
LOWER WORKING CLASS	28	14	9	0	2	8	3	4	4	16	11	1	0	16	5	1	1
TOTALS	83	43	31	0	3	26	15	9	11	47	31	1	3	34	16	8	8

* ALL but six (black lower class) children said Voice II was black.

** TOTAL N for this Table is 83. Nine children indicated "don't know" for race of Voice I.

children to evaluate Black nonstandard speech more positively than (what was perceived as) white nonstandard speech should be investigated further, and a larger sample of 8 and 9 year-old Black subjects should be included. Race of the children was incidental to the present study and the number of Black children included (twelve) was too small to test for significance of this variable.

Our discussions with the children afterwards seemed to support the findings on the semantic differential scale. The discussions showed that the children possessed and could conceptualize an awareness of speech differences. In response to queries about the difference between the voices some typical comments were: "The second one spoke wrong"; "The first one sounded better"; "The second one was poor" and so forth. In fact their comments merely paralleled their responses on the semantic differential scale.

Summary

In summary then, this study demonstrated that the subject 8 and 9 year-old children are sensitive to speech differences, and have absorbed many of the attitudes of society toward standard and nonstandard speech. Their responses on the semantic differential scale indicate that they are learning to stigmatize others on the basis of nonstandard speech. They are also able to verbally conceptualize their attitudes toward speech differences. However, the study indicates that they have not yet formulated a complete stereotype matching the adult model, since their judgments about

the speakers functioned independently of perceived race to a degree not previously suspected.

Implications for Education

Although the generality of the results of our study will become clear only after extensions to other samples of children, there are several tentative suggestions that can be drawn from it. In one of his well-known papers James Sledd argues that "society uses language differences as one of its most insidious means of social control (and) we are led to judge others - and ourselves - by criteria which have no real bearing on actual worth." (1972:456). While we may not agree with the harshness of Sledd's words, it seems clear that the 8 and 9 year-old children in our study were beginning to learn to do just that -- to judge others by criteria that "have no real bearing on actual worth." They were able to perceive socially significant variables in speech, and to make social judgments on the basis of those perceptions. One clear implication for educators would seem to be that we cannot approach such children as though they had "clean attitudinal slates." Clearly, they are well on the way to developing those linguistic attitudes held by society at large. In addition, the fact that the children in our study were able to verbally conceptualize their responses to speech variations suggests that educators should be prepared to take advantage of this ability.

Another factor to consider in working with such children is what might be termed the "attitude flexibility" exhibited by our subjects. As we noted, they had not developed a complete stereotype reaction to the nonstandard voice; they seemed more flexible in their

reactions than adults in studies reported elsewhere (e.g., De Camp and Baird, 1973). For example, the nonstandard voice in our study was perceived by the majority of our subjects as spoken by a black person who was both "smart " and "nice". This suggestion of "attitude flexibility" in our children is consistent with the findings in a large scale study conducted by Lambert and Klineberg (1967) of childrens' attitudes toward foreigners. Examining the views of 3,300 children from three age groups (6,10, and 14) in eleven different cultures, Lambert and Klineberg found that although there were some cross-national differences, the 10 year-old period "emerged as the most promising one, for at that age children were particularly ready to view foreign peoples as similar and were especially friendly toward them, even those viewed as dissimilar." (217) They also suggest that such findings have implications for childrens' attitudes toward minority groups in their own societies since "developmental changes in views of foreign peoples undoubtedly affect . . . views of local subgroups."(226) Hensley's (1970) study also suggests that beyond the age of 10 or so childrens' attitudes "harden". Noting that the Black high school students in her study, themselves speakers of nonstandard Black English, consistently rated a standard English guise more favorably than a nonstandard Black English guise, Hensley suggested that "...eventually students take on the culture and language values of the dominant society." (15).

Our study then tends to confirm that childrens' attitudes are somewhat more flexible as they approach age 10 than they are a few

years earlier or later. If this is borne out by subsequent studies, then children at about this age might be most receptive to the sort of consciousness-raising activities suggested by a number of writers. Abrahams for example, has suggested that "when one becomes conscious of one's own tendency to stereotype others it can become an extremely useful technique for understanding of these others and their cultural differences." (1972:20). Arguing in favor of such strategies, Lambert and Klineberg (1967) suggest that "without the purposeful intervention of parents and teachers (children would be encouraged to think) that everyone, everywhere holds what are often stereotyped views of particular groups." (214)

If the decision is made to attempt to bring children to an awareness of attitudes towards others' speech what might be some techniques to accomplish this? Williams et. al (1977) have written a book to do just this with teachers; perhaps some of their techniques would be useful in working with children. In one activity they suggest for example, teachers make recordings of their own language in which they try to vary their speech to sound "different". Other teachers rate the various samples using a semantic differential scale. The ratings and the reasons for them are then discussed by the group; the hope is that understandings about the nature of language variation and language attitudes will result. Similarly, Griffin (1970) suggests encouraging students to examine variations in language among classmates, and then leading students into a discussion of

language differences and their causes. Such techniques were used by Griffin to increase childrens' "linguistic sophistication" and induce them to "become more tolerant of speech variations."

In addition to the English educators noted above, foreign language educators have also addressed the question of cross-cultural attitudes. Seeyle, for example, has written a book describing techniques for achieving seven "cultural goals", including one enabling students to "demonstrate intellectual curiosity about a target culture and empathy toward its people." (1974:245) Seeyle suggests that positive, direct contacts with "different others" is one of the most effective means of bringing about attitudinal change. Beyond that, Seeyle suggests specific classroom techniques for promoting understanding of cultural differencs. Such activities as "culture capsules" and "culture assimilators", designed to bring an awareness of the legitimacy of different cultural behaviors, are suggested to provide motivation for attitudinal change. Such techniques would seem to be worth considering in any attempt to bring children to an awareness of their reactions to speech differences.

Like Seeyle, Lambert and Klineberg cite direct-contact experiences as useful in helping learners overcome stereotypes. They note one experiment (James and Tenen, 1953) in which London school children exhibited markedly more positive attitudes toward Africans after being taught for several weeks by two African teachers. In another experiment (Zeligs and Hendrickson, 1935), a sample of American

children were asked what they thought were the reasons for the attitudes they held toward various racial groups. The list was extensive and included differences in customs, physical appearance, language and religion. The list is of interest because it indicates what at the conscious level is responsible for the attitudes held by the children, a first step perhaps in helping them cope with their feelings. Of course, as Lambert and Klineberg point out, stereotypes arise from a variety of causes, only some of which are immediately accessible to consciousness.

How effective might these and other techniques be in instilling in students more tolerance of inter-group differences? One indication of some complications comes from research done by Frederick Williams, et al (1971). In one experiment, teachers were asked to evaluate speech patterns of a Black child whom they saw and heard on videotape. Despite the fact that standard white speech patterns were superimposed on the tape, the child was nevertheless perceived by the teachers to be speaking less standardly than a white child voicing the same speech patterns. Perhaps since our 8 and 9 year-old children demonstrated what we are calling attitudinal flexibility they would be less likely than Williams' teachers to behave in this way. Nevertheless we need to note Giles and Powsland's (1975) comments on the implications of William's experiment: "Even if all the problems involved in changing a child's speech style could be overcome so that the child was objectively able to speak the prestige

code, he might still be perceived as speaking in a non-standard way." (109) This suggests that factors in addition to speech characteristics must be considered if intervention techniques relating to childrens' cross-cultural attitudes are to be planned.

In conclusion: the attitude study suggests that children by the age of 8 and 9 are developing stereotyped attitudes toward speakers of a nonstandard variety of English, but that at this age they are somewhat flexible in their attitudes and have not yet developed a full stereotype matching the adult model. Should this trend be borne out in subsequent research it is suggested that those planning intervention strategies of the type mentioned above should take into consideration the ways in which age and other factors may affect childrens' attitudes toward speech differences.

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